Finding Your Path in Tech Marketing

What you need to know when evaluating marketing career options in the start-up world.

I'm often asked how to get into tech marketing. Over the years, I've discovered that breaking the conversation in three parts helps people translate their strengths and interests in the tech world. Specifically, it's important to look at the target customer, the variety of marketing roles and the stage of financing of the company. Let's start with the target customer, of which there are three types: consumer, enterprise and small & medium business (SMB).

The target customer determines how you promote your product and who you market it to. A business to consumer (B2C) company targets consumers like you and me. In this segment, your efforts are spent attracting consumers and getting them to use your product repeatedly. The best way to do this is through telling a great story about the product itself. Your product IS your marketing, and your ability to analyse customer data gives you the essential insight to understand what is and isn't working (from both a product and marketing point of view). A bonus is that it can be satisfying to work on a product you and your friends know and use.

The enterprise segment focuses on large, Fortune 500 companies. Customer acquisition is driven by direct sales, and an enterprise marketer works closely with a sales team to convince a group of people that the company offers the right "solution" to a specific need. Enterprise customers often have

custom requirements, and marketing must follow suit. It's a complex sales and marketing process that deals with multiple layers and personalities in the target organisation. Successful marketers in this space need to do a great deal of qualitative research and remain close to the sales team to understand both the "political" and "procedural" sides.

The last category of customers, SMBs, is a hybrid of the first two. This is a diverse group, and you encounter SMBs every day. SMBs can be a corner cupcake shop, a retail store at the mall or a medium-sized Chinese electronics importer. The decision maker at an SMB may be a person with little or no formal education or it could be an ex-McKinsey consultant who has decided to eschew the corporate life. SMBs tend to be price-sensitive and time-strapped. Unlike an enterprise, where entire teams need to be courted, there is usually only one decision maker. Of course, your product has to be good, but the biggest challenge is getting it in front of the decision maker, and then persuading her to buy it.

The six types of marketing roles

After you've considered your audience, the next question to address is: What roles should I look for? When I first applied for marketing roles, I simply had no idea what the various titles meant. After I joined Facebook, everything began to make sense.

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If you are feeling a bit overwhelmed, you're not alone.

All marketing roles ultimately revolve around the customer, each one from a different viewpoint.

Product Marketing: What do our customers want/need, how do we get our product team to build it and what is the best way to tell customers about the products we have?

Product marketers are the glue between marketing and product development. They talk to the customers, research the market and work with the product team(s) to understand use cases and prioritise features based on their potential impact. Once a product is nearly ready to launch, a product marketer prepares all the relevant materials and works with marketing, support and operations to ensure a smooth launch. If you are an excellent project manager and love bringing a product to market, this is the role for you.

Acquisition Marketing: Where can we find our customers, and how do we get them to try our product (and engage with it more)?

This is where the company meets the market. Acquisition marketers create ads, short videos, headlines and calls-to-action (including punchy subject lines for emails). Their goals are finding repeatable and profitable ways of acquiring customers. The term "demand generation" is often used in the B2B space. Running events (e.g. private dinners, conferences), attending trade shows and hosting webinars are much more prevalent when working with "high-value prospects" (C-suite execs with large purchasing power).

Marketing Communications: What information and materials do customers need to purchase our products and remain informed about them?

Marketing communications teams produce materials highlighting the company's products, customer successes, best practices, etc. These marketers work across the lifecycle from pre- to post-customer acquisition. They tend to have strong communication and writing skills, as well as project management skills. I find they often have extrovert personalities.

Customer Marketing: How can we help our customers get the most value out of our product?

Customer marketers focus on welcoming users, educating them about the product and emailing them with regular product updates or best practices. In the enterprise world, many teams (e.g. customer success, support, technical training) interact with users, and customer marketers need to coordinate messaging across all those teams. In the B2C world, however, they tend to be more autonomous and this simplifies the work.

Brand Marketing: What do we want our customers to think and feel about our company?

As a brand marketer, you must affirm what makes your company different. If your competitor calls itself the market leader (and actually is), how do you differentiate your company? More fundamentally, what does your company want to be known for and how can you best express that message? Branding is a game of consistency and repetition over a long period. Adding to that complexity, measurements are somewhat indirect and often performed by third parties, e.g. brand awareness surveys and metrics such as share of voice and share of wallet. Brand marketers monitor the market but must also build strong support across their firms to ensure everyone respects the brand guidelines.

Corporate Communications: What do we want the market to know and think about our company?

Corporate Communications is about aligning internal and external messaging so it tells the same story. These marketers ensure that employees, investors and the public all have a favourable view of their organisation by communicating a consistent message about its values, direction and decisions. Not only does this team work closely with Product Marketing and Brand Marketing to ensure alignment, their work encompasses all employees, from the CEO doing an interview about the company to an engineer presenting at a conference.
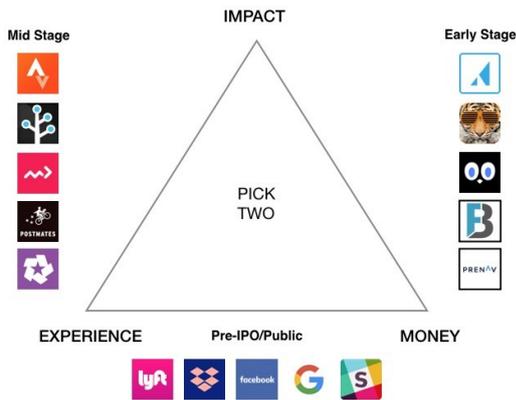
The four stages of a tech company

So far, we've explored the different types of customers and marketing roles. It's also important to understand what it means to work for a tech company based on its stage of financing. Working for a start-up is very different from working for an established public company like Google or Facebook. There are four stages of financing:

- Early stage: No funding to series A
- Mid-stage: Series B and C
- Late stage/pre-IPO: Usually series D and above
- Public: Public and pre-IPO are combined here to simplify

I've worked at start-ups at all stages, from founding to IPO, in marketing and product growth roles. To help you examine your career options, I have developed a simple framework using the familiar "Pick two out of three" triangle:

IMPACT

Mid Stage · Early Stage

PICK
TWO

EXPERIENCE · Pre-IPO/Public · MONEY

reasons: They are recognisable, functions are developed across the organisation and the talent is strong. In addition, any equity you receive is liquid or near liquid. You may learn a great deal about other functions and get a crash course on how to run a great tech company. For me, the impact of Facebook on my personal and professional development was enormous.

My last piece of advice: Occasionally, there may be a start-up, such as Dropbox, Stripe or Slack that defies gravity. If you ever see a company like this, don't think twice. As Sheryl Sandberg said, "If you're offered a seat on a rocket ship, you don't ask what seat. You just get on."

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Impact is what you can do for the company. Every day you come in the office you do something that helps the company survive and which, in general, wouldn't get done without you. You also very likely care about the mission of the company. Impact usually results in a meaningful and satisfying role.

Experience is the ability to develop your skills, knowledge (best practices) and network of mentors and peers. The company you work for will also be recognisable and help further your career.

Money is, of course, your earning potential. There is no golden rule, but adjusting for risk, pre-IPO and publicly traded companies are best in this regard. Without adjusting for risk, an early-stage start-up can be very rewarding financially, but the odds of it becoming a unicorn are low.

Based on this triangle, early-stage start-ups are ideal when you want to have a material impact on a company and also play the start-up lottery. Your equity grant won't be worth very much, but will be much larger on a percentage basis than at a mid-stage start-up.

Mid-stage start-ups are still small enough that you can enjoy a broad, impactful role early on in your career. Most importantly, you will be surrounded by mentors, peers and managers who will help you grow. This is a great place to be if money isn't your top priority, but you want some level of financial stability.

Pre-IPO and public companies are great for many

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